

IF THE BRITISH BREAK THROUGH THE LINE

What the Russian Success in the East
Suggests May Happen in the West—
Attack on a Broad Front the
Likely Method—Where the
Move Must Come.

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The partial success of the Russian offensive—that is, the actual success achieved in breaking through the Austrian lines and the partial success so far in extending the advance beyond the old front—offers an interesting basis for a study of the situation on the Western front. We know that sooner or later the British must attack the German lines between the Somme River and the sea. No man can forecast the result of such an attack, but since the attack is becoming imminent it is worth while to examine certain possibilities.

In this article I am going to set forth briefly what would happen if the British were presently able to break the German lines in Artois and Flanders on the same scale that the Russians have broken the Austrian lines in Volhynia, Bukovina and Galicia. I do not desire to be understood as making any prophecy that the British will break the German lines; they failed at Neuve Chapelle and at Loos, after very substantial initial successes, because of an inability to prepare for subsequent operations. They may fail again.

On a Broad Front.

The Russian success has established a new fact in the trench warfare. It has demonstrated that, all things considered, the attack upon a broad front is the most successful method of piercing the trench lines of an opponent. It stands in direct contrast to the relative failure of all save one of the attacks upon a narrow front, which have become the classic form of attempting to change a war of position into a war of movement.

At Loos the British attacked on a front of some ten miles, at Neuve Chapelle on a front of five. In Champagne the French attacked in the spring of 1915 on a front of less than twelve miles, and in the autumn on a front of less than twenty miles. The German attack upon Ypres in the same spring and the present attack upon Verdun both have been made upon fronts very circumscribed. All of these attacks have gained ground; all of them have resulted in large captures of men and material; but in no case has there been a permanent piercing of the line, although there have been temporary punctures, notably by the Germans at Ypres, the British at Loos and the French in the second Champagne battle.

An absolute success flowing from the attack upon a narrow front was scored by the Germans more than a year ago at the Danjue. Here they massed a huge amount of artillery on a front of little more than ten miles, annihilated the Russian trenches, opened a gap in the Russian line and poured through. This was in the first days of May. It was September before the Russian retreat had stopped, and it had covered several hundred miles.

The Narrow Attack.

But precisely the same tactics, joined with an even greater concentration of artillery in front of Verdun, have won for the Germans in over four months a net gain of little more than six miles on a front of less than ten. To make this gain they have sacrificed large numbers of men (their losses are certainly much higher than the French); they have used vast quantities of ammunition and used up very large numbers of heavy guns, for the life of a heavy gun is ridiculously short.

Thus we have clearly demonstrated the percentage of failures, as compared with successes, which has been scored by the use of the attack upon the narrow front after tremendous artillery concentration and hitherto unprecedented bombardment. As a result there has been a very marked trend toward the attack on a broad front in the minds of those who make and discuss plans of campaign.

Turning now to the British sectors of the Western front, the actual situation is this: From the Yser to the Somme the British hold something less than ninety miles of trenches; south of the Somme and to the Oise the French under Foch hold

perhaps thirty miles more. Between the Yser and the sea the French and the Belgians hold rather more than fifteen miles. Allowing for the curves, the whole line may cover 150 miles between Noyon and Nieuport.

Roughly speaking, the portions of the line held by the British completely cover the sectors from which an offensive may be expected to move. The region occupied by the Belgians, supported by the French, is a swamp, after two years of inundation. The sector in front of Foch is too strong to hold out much hope for a successful drive. Resting, as the German flanks here do, on the fortress of Peronne and the Somme marshes at the north and the Noyon Hills on the south, it is an exceedingly difficult front to break.

The Western Line.

Looking backward, we see that the Belgian sector and the Foch sector, those about the Yser and west of Roye, have been in the main inactive since the weeks immediately following the Marne and the Battle of Flanders. The Germans after the Marne made a great effort to move west from the Oise upon Amiens and turn the French flank; they failed in a battle little known to the war readers, but one of the most desperate of the Western operations. More familiar is the German thrust at Calais, which was checked at the Yser, when the sluices were opened and the country flooded.

Subsequently the British made their first effort to break the German lines at Neuve Chapelle. Here they almost reached the Aubers ridge, which is the key to Lille. A few months later they attacked from trenches to the south of La Bassée and reached Loos. This time they almost succeeded in turning the Germans out of both La Bassée and Lens. Finally, the French in June, 1915, made a terrific assault upon the German front south of Lens and northeast of Arras. In this struggle the French took the Lorette heights, the villages west of the Vimy ridge, including Souchez; they also took foot on the Vimy ridge, but could not progress.

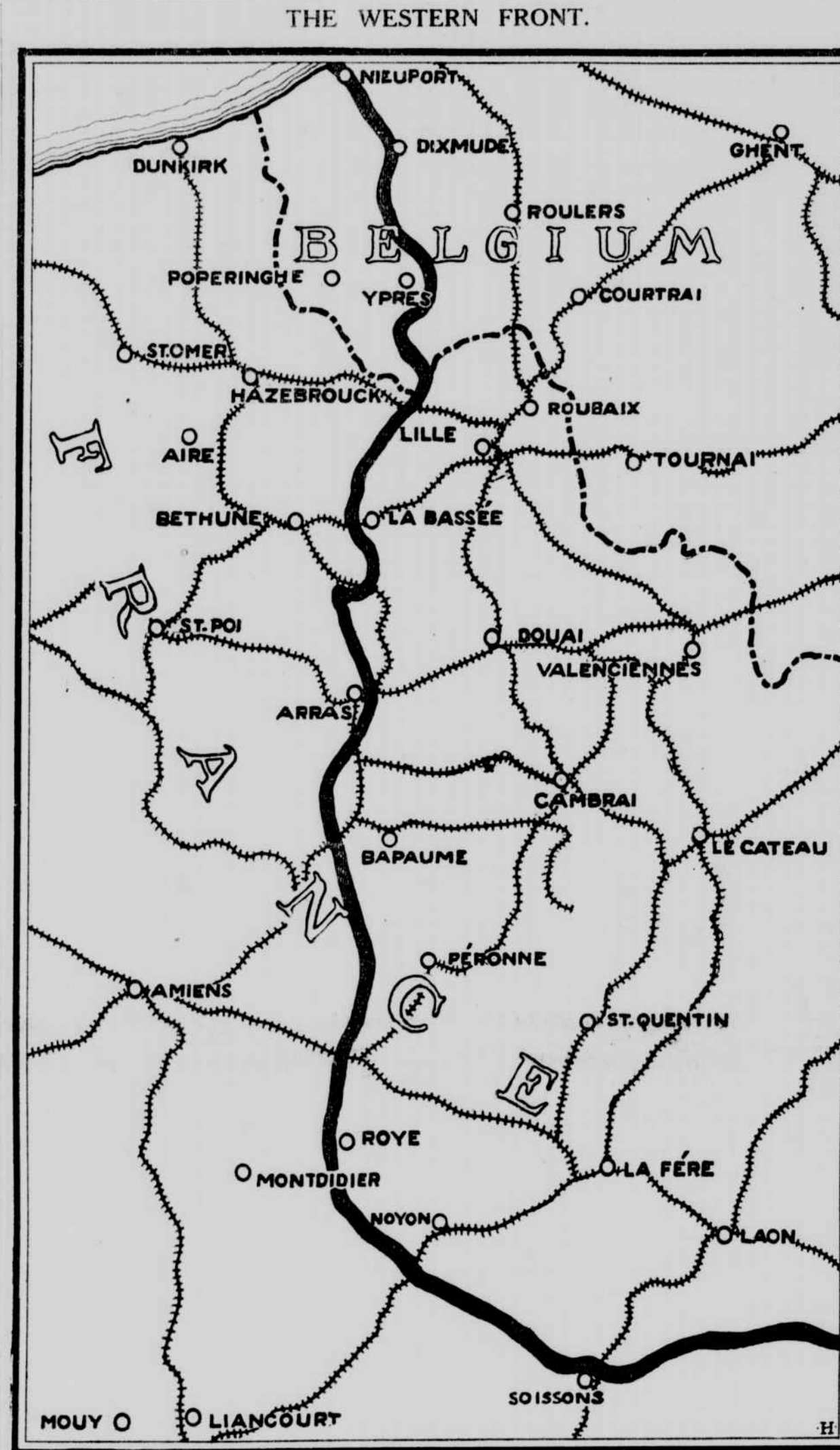
Where the British Must Attack.

It is clear from the past that the Allied strategy has disclosed the points at which a successful attack can be hoped for. We are fairly safe in believing that when the British attack they will attack moving east out of Bethune and out of Arras, which is now in their keeping. They are equally certain to strike east from Albert, north of the Somme, and probably from Ypres, where their movement will be north, not east. Roughly speaking, the objectives will be Lille, La Bassée, Lens and Bapaume, which lie in their immediate front, and then Douai, Cambrai and Le Cateau, which lie behind these places and are on the railroad lines essential to German military existence in Northern France.

We have here then a front of something less than a hundred miles, as compared with the two hundred on which the Russians made their great and so far successful advance of a month ago. Lille at the north and Peronne at the south of the German front here recall the Austrian strongholds of Lutsk and Czernowitz. Douai is about in the same relation to Lille that Dubno is to Lutsk. Cambrai recalls the German position facing Tarnopol in the centre of the Austro-German front from Priepet to Rumania.

The Question of Railroads.

There is, however, one essential difference between the Eastern and Western situation. In the East the main railroads follow an east and west direction. The Russians, therefore, having broken the Austro-German lines, marched westward along the railroads. But in France the railroads run north and south—that is, parallel with, not perpendicular to, the front. Accordingly, a successful offensive by the British pushed as far as that the Russians have carried beyond Lutsk toward Kovel would cut all the vital railroads in German possession west of the Oise.



Thick black line shows present front; other lines show railways.

Were these railroads cut, the Germans would have no choice but to retire from France; they would be compelled to abandon all their positions between the Argonne Hills and the Scheldt River, and the liberation of France would be practically complete. The problem would then be whether they would be able to form on a new line from the Argonne and the Meuse to the sea, extending from Mezières, through Douai, Cambrai and Le Cateau, to the sea, and thence to Tournai. In a word, Lille would be as untenable as was Dubno, after the Russians had broken through at Lutsk and to the south of Lutsk. To the south Peronne would be similarly threatened with envelopment, if it had not already been outflanked by a drive from Albert.

A Parallel.

Now to take a specific parallel. Coming west out of their trenches, the Russians stormed Lutsk, took it, broke through the whole Austrian front, opening a gap perhaps thirty miles wide and penetrated not much less than thirty-five miles toward Kovel, reaching the Stachod River. Suppose the British, attacking from Arras and in front of Lens, should accomplish the same thing in miles, where would they be and what would they have accomplished?

Substantially the situation would be this: Going a little north of east, the advance would pass through Douai and reach Valenciennes. Going a little south of east, it would pass Cambrai and approach Le Cateau. In this advance the main Lille-Paris railroad would be cut at Douai, one of the two principal Paris-Brussels railroads would be cut at Valenciennes and the other would be threatened at Le Cateau. If the advance could be pushed as far as the Russians have pushed

their drive into Bukovina then Le Cateau would be reached and the British would cut the other road to Brussels and the main line of German supply—that which comes from Aix-la-Chapelle, through Liège and Namur to Le Cateau and thence to St. Quentin and La Fère.

At Valenciennes the British would be far in the rear and to the south of Lille; they would be astride the railroad from Lille to Mons and menacing the only other important line leading into Lille from the east, that from Tournai. In a word, Lille would be as untenable as was Dubno, after the Russians had broken through at Lutsk and to the south of Lutsk. To the south Peronne would be similarly threatened with envelopment, if it had not already been outflanked by a drive from Albert.

The Consequences.

In this situation there would be no choice for the Germans. They would have to draw back their lines between Noyon and the sea; they would have to evacuate Peronne and Lille. But they would have to do more than this. At Noyon their line turns due east and runs to the Meuse before Verdun. The sectors of Roye, La Fère and Laon are supplied by the railroads which the British would have cut. They would be in the position of the Russian Carpathian armies after Mackensen had penetrated the lines of the Danajec army before Tarnopol.

Given a smashing success with little warning, the Germans in the angle between Peronne and Soissons would be in grave danger of being enveloped; they would be in a nasty corner and it would require extreme skill to draw them out. They would, too, have to retire through

broken country and away from the lines of railroad by which they have been supplied. If the French chose the same time to make an attack on the Champagne front, this would complicate the situation.

But I do not mean to carry this speculation to absurd limits. What is interesting is that we have just seen a successful breaking of trench lines on a very wide front. We have seen the penetration of the Russians for thirty and even forty miles within the former Austro-German front; we have seen the Austro-Germans compelled to reestablish their line well behind their old position and there is still doubt as to the degree to which they have succeeded.

The Coming Offensive.

Now on the Western front we have sound reason for believing that within a relatively brief period there is to be another Allied offensive. It is possible that it will be made on a narrow front, say on a fifteen mile front, between Arras and La Bassée, on the familiar ground of the earlier contests for the Vimy ridge and Lens. But all such Allied attacks have failed and the Verdun operation does not invite imitation.

Behind this line from the Somme to the Yser we know that the British have concentrated nearly a million and a half of men, that they are just about through with the task of getting over big guns and that they are beginning to have sufficient ammunition and have had no call to use large quantities of shells since the Loos fighting of last September.

A Waiting Game.

The French are making a gallant and so far sustained resistance before Verdun. The Allied strategy plainly envis-

Great British Drive Expected in July—
From La Bassée to Peronne the
Chief Blow Will Be Struck—
Railroads of Germans—The
Chance of Success.

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ages a waiting game to the point where the Germans have used up as much of their reserve as can be eliminated without risk to Allied fortunes incident to German progress either at Verdun or elsewhere.

The Russian success has drawn large numbers of German troops to Kovel. They were on foot in Germany and intended for an offensive this summer. Some of the great mass of German troops which were concentrated behind the lines facing the British last winter have certainly been transferred to Verdun.

Sometime in July.

We may expect, then, some further delay on the part of the British, a delay not due to unwillingness or unpreparedness, but a delay that is a main point in Allied strategy. The British will attack whenever their Allies ask them; this is sure. We may expect that the British will wait until the Germans have to weaken their Western lines to meet the Russian drive. This simply follows out the plan of the Russians, who waited until the Eastern lines had been stripped for attacks upon the Italians and for the Verdun operation.

But sometime in July, unless all the forecasts are wrong and all the better informed military observers mistaken, the British will make their first great concentrated effort to break the Western lines. They may or may not be helped by a French operation in Champagne. Personally I do not believe the French will be asked for any great effort. But what the French are now doing is daily reducing the German effectives before Verdun at a rate which must be high, although the cost to themselves is great.

We may expect that when this British thrust comes it will be delivered on a wide front, that it will possibly be accompanied by a very heavy attack north of Lille, from the Ypres salient down the Lys Valley toward Menin and Courtrai, threatening Ghent and the German communications with Ostend and Zeebrugge.

The Chief Blow.

But the chief blow must come south of Lille and from La Bassée to Peronne. Here is a front of some fifty miles, which, aside from the Vimy ridge, part of which is in British hands, offers no considerable natural obstacle. The slope is with the British and they will advance down hill into the broad plain of Northern France.

Only a small advance, a dozen miles, would seriously menace Lille and cut the Lille-Douai railroad, it would take Peronne and threaten St. Quentin to the south, it would make the German position in all of this region from the Oise to the sea exceedingly dangerous.

Yet such an advance, if it were to go no further, would mean that the great British effort had failed to accomplish anything really considerable. It would mean that the Germans would be able to hold on in France and Belgium until next spring, for the British will not be able to deliver more than one blow this year, and if it does not come until late July or August the season for operations will be relatively short.

What to Watch.

Those who are at all interested in the military situation should devote a little time to the study of the map of the part of the Western front from the Oise to the sea. The least trained eye can easily distinguish the meaning of the railroad lines that run parallel to the German front. They can easily understand what it would mean if the British were able to push east and cut these lines. The distance is short; it is not greater than the distance covered by the Russians in recent weeks, but covering this distance would have a far greater effect than the Russian advance because of the situation of the railway lines, and, for that matter, the roads as well.

When there does come a report of British activity it is well to watch the official reports for mention of La Bassée, Lens, Bapaume and Peronne, as well as Menin and Roulers, north of Ypres. Unless several of these places yield promptly to the British attack it will be safe to conclude that the drive has been held at the outset, as all Allied drives have hitherto been held.

The Next Step.

If several of these places fall at once the next step will be an attack upon Douai, Cambrai and an effort to envelop Lille both from the north and from the south by movements that have as their objectives Courtrai and Tournai. If the British reach Douai and Cambrai, it will then be time to recognize that they have made a great advance and that the whole German line in France is in deadly peril.

If the movement progresses and the British reach Valenciennes, La Cateau and even St. Quentin, then it will be clear that the end of German occupation in France has come and the real problem will be whether the Germans can draw their troops out without large surrenders and under conditions which are wholly similar to those faced by the Russians in Galicia last year.

In Belgium.

So far I have discussed the situation in France. It remains to say a word about the Belgian possibility. An overwhelming success south of Lille, followed by a very rapid advance, such as Mackensen made in the first days of his great Galician campaign last summer, would imperil the whole German situation in Western Belgium; it might easily mean a retirement behind the Meuse from Mezières or Givet to Ghent; it might mean a retirement behind the Meuse as far north as Namur and the standing between the Sambre and the Scheldt on lines that have been prepared. Lastly, there is the final possibility that it might involve a retirement behind the Meuse from Liège, through Namur to Mezières.

So far the Germans have succeeded in stopping every attack upon their Western front within three miles. They have themselves never been able to make more, except before Verdun, where they have made around six. It is open to doubt whether their lines can be broken now, after they have had more than a year and a half to fortify them. It is open to doubt whether a penetration can be made on a front sufficiently wide to open a gap. The best informed military observers wholly disagree on this point. The Verdun failure justifies the school who doubt; the Russian success supports those who believe. The debate can be settled only on the battlefield.

The Chance of Success.

I say again, I have not attempted here to hint or assert that the German lines can be broken. Personally I believe the thing is entirely possible; but far better informed critics, who are much more qualified to hold an opinion, assert that the thing is impossible. But I have endeavored to show what would happen if the lines should be broken and the successive phases that the operation would follow as it developed.

Unless the British offensive shall turn the Germans out of France, save between the Meuse and the Ardennes, it will be a failure. If it does this, it will do all that any one can even with great optimism hope for. If, in addition, it should free a portion of Belgium it would be the greatest success of the war and would repay Britain for all her disappointments and waitings. It would also leave Britain's allies little to complain of. But it is unfair to criticize the British for failure to act now; they are following the lines of a strategy which has been devised by all the Allies in conference, and their own work is laid out for them, not by themselves, but by their French and Russian allies in a large measure.